

CHAPTER 4

Sources and Attitudes in *Óláfs saga helga* in *Heimskringla*

The prologues to *Heimskringla* and the *Separate Saga of Saint Olaf* famously emphasize the role of poetic sources in reconstructing the early history of Scandinavia. The general prologue to *Heimskringla* argues that these sources are likely to be truthful despite the inherent danger of flattering princes (ÍF 26:5):

Með Haraldi konungi váru skáld, ok kunna menn enn kvæði þeira ok allra konunga kvæði, þeira er síðan hafa verit í Nóregi, ok tókum þar mest dæmi af, þat er sagt er í þeim kvæðum, er kveðin váru fyrir sjálfum hofðingjunum eða sonum þeira. Tókum vér þat allt fyrir satt, er í þeim kvæðum finnsk um ferðir þeira eða orrostur. En þat er háttr skálda at lofa þann mest, er þá eru þeir fyrir, en engi myndi þat þora at segja sjálfum honum þau verk hans, er allir þeir, er heyrði, vissi, at hégómi væri ok skrök, ok svá sjálfr hann. Þat væri þá háð, en eigi lof.

[There were skalds at the court of King Harald [Fairhair] and people still know their poems, and the poems about all the kings who reigned in Norway later. We have taken our chief support from what is said in the poems that were recited before the chieftains [rulers] themselves and their sons. We consider everything to be true that is found in those poems about their expeditions and battles. It is the custom of skalds to heap the greatest praise on the man in whose presence they find themselves, but no one would dare to recount to his very face deeds that

all the listeners knew to be nonsense and fantasy, even he [the ruler] himself. That would be derision, not praise.]

The prologue to the *Separate Saga of Saint Olaf* (longer version) is fuller and more probing (ÍF 27:421–22):¹

En síðan er Haraldr inn hárfagri var konungr í Nóregi, þá vitu menn miklu gørr sannendi at segja frá ævi konunga þeira, er í Nóregi hafa verit. Á hans dögum byggðisk Ísland, ok var þá mikil ferð af Nóregi til Íslands. Spurðu menn þá á hverju sumri tíðendi landa þessa í milli, ok var þat síðan í minni fært ok haft eptir til frásagna. En þó þykki mér þat merkiligast til sannenda, er berum orðum er sagt í kvæðum eða oðrum kveðskap, þeim er svá var ort um konunga eða aðra hofðingja, at þeir sjálfir heyrðu, eða í erfikvæðum þeim, er skáldin færðu sonum þeira. Þau orð, er í kveðskap standa, eru in sǫmu sem í fyrstu váru, ef rétt er kveðit, þótt hverr maðr hafi síðan numit at oðrum, ok má því ekki breyta. En sǫgur þær, er sagðar eru, þá er þat hætt, at eigi skilisk ollum á einn veg. En sumir hafa eigi minni, þá er frá líðr, hvernig þeim var sagt, ok gengsk þeim mjök í minni optliga, ok verða frásagnir ómerkligar. Þat var meirr en tvau hundruð vetra tólfræð, er Ísland var byggt, áðr menn tœki hér sǫgur at rita, ok var þat lǫng ævi ok vant, at sǫgur hefði eigi gengizk í munni, ef eigi væri kvæði, bæði ný ok forn, þau er menn tœki þar af sannendi fræðinnar. Svá hafa gort fyrr fræðimenninir, þá er þeir vildu sannenda leita, at taka fyrri satt þeira manna orð, er sjálfir sá tíðendi ok þá váru nær staddir. En þar er skáldin váru í orrustum, þá eru tœk vitni þeira, svá þat ok, er hann kvað fyr sjálfum hofðingjanum, þá myndi hann eigi þora at segja þau verk hans, er bæði sjálfr hofðinginn ok allir þeir, er heyrðu, vissu, at hann hefði hvergi nær verit. Þat væri þá háð, en eigi lof.

[But after the time Haraldr hárfagri ruled in Norway people are much better able to tell the truth about the lives of the kings of Norway. In his day Iceland was settled, and there was a great deal of travel from Norway to Iceland. News passed between these countries every summer and it was then committed to memory and passed along in the form of stories. But it seems to me that what is most noteworthy in terms of truthfulness is what is told in plain words in poems and poetic recitation composed about kings and other chieftains in such circumstances

as they themselves heard them, or in the commemorative poems that the skalds conveyed to their sons. The words in the poems are the same as the original ones if the recitation is correct, even though each man has learned from another, because [the form] cannot be changed. But the sagas [stories] that are told are not understood the same way by everyone. Some people do not remember, as time passes, how they were told, and they often deteriorate greatly in memory, and the stories become unreliable. It was more than 240 years after Iceland was settled before people began to write sagas here; that was a long time, and [it is] unlikely that the sagas [stories] would not have deteriorated in transmission if there had not been poems, both new and old, from which people could take truthful lore. Earlier historians [Ari and Sæmundr?] bent on learning the truth were accustomed to accept as true the words of people who themselves were witnesses to the events or were near at hand. When the skalds participated in battles, their testimony is reliable, and likewise whatever the skalds recited before the chieftains themselves. [The skald] would not dare to ascribe to him deeds when both the chieftain himself and all the listeners knew that he had been nowhere in the vicinity. That would be derision, not praise.]

In the second version the writer distinguishes carefully between mutable prose transmissions and poetic transmissions that are maintained word for word. In one sentence he states that stories would have deteriorated if there had not been poems giving access to the truth. This hints at an interaction between prose and poetry; the latter could perhaps have stabilized the former, but we might wish for more detail. Did tellers of stories combine both so as to authenticate the prose, or were prose stories told and poems recited quite independently so that there were reliable and less reliable traditions in competition with each other? It is the question of independent prose stories that is at the heart of what follows.

The Background

I propose to single out six such stories and explore their roots in oral tradition. The supposition that they are primarily oral rests on several indications. In the first place they are not supported by skaldic stanzas and could therefore not have been extrapolated from such stanzas.

In the second place they all involve Icelanders or were familiar to Icelanders who were present at the time of the events. These Icelanders could have “committed [them] to memory and passed [them] along in the form of stories,” just as the prologue to *The Separate Saga* suggests. The avenues of transmission seem quite palpable. Finally, the stories are cast in a style easily reconciled with oral telling; they are dramatically formulated and well told. That they were originally oral stories is of course only a hypothesis, and the reader may object that they could just as well have been the work of a good writer. Such a writer’s hand is probably visible in some formal speeches and to some extent in the pointed political outlook. Oral and written features are no doubt intertwined, but I will focus initially on the oral features in the six stories, conscious that an appropriate response would be to emphasize the authorial contribution.

Oral transmission is admittedly difficult terrain, open only to conjecture. It has not been an important topic of discussion in *Heimskringla* studies, for the good reason that so much of *Heimskringla* is based on known or plausibly hypothesized written sources. All of Part III can be traced to *Morkinskinna* and perhaps *Fagrskinna*. In Part I prior versions of *Haralds saga hárfagra* and *Hákonar saga góða* have been surmised. Alongside the main source, Oddr’s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, a version of *Jómsvíkinga saga* and the lost **Hlaðajarla saga* have been thought to underlie *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*. *Óláfs saga helga* too has its written precursors, quite likely Styrmir Kárasón’s version of the saga, perhaps *Fóstbræðra saga*, and certainly *Færeyinga saga* and some version of *Orkneyinga saga*. But there are no written sources for a number of semi-independent stories in *Óláfs saga helga*. As we will see below, they cannot have been invented from whole cloth because traces of them show up in texts that are unrelated to *Heimskringla*. The only remaining option is therefore the direct use of oral tradition. That concept covers a multitude of matters, from individual names to genealogical relations to random bits of information to memorized stanzas and finally to fully formed stories. It is the final category that I will focus on in the following pages. There can scarcely be any doubt that there were fully formed stories in Icelandic tradition because the sagas and *þættir* are full of them. After surveying the opening sequences in *Óláfs saga helga*, I will turn to six of these stories, review them in some detail, and reflect on their sources.

The Preliminary Narrative

The 412 pages of Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson's edition of *Óláfs saga helga* include 178 full or partial stanzas, but the reader quickly observes that they are unevenly distributed.² The first 24 pages (pp. 3–27) on Óláfr's early viking adventures are so densely buttressed by stanzas from Óttarr svarti's "Höfuðlausn" and Sigvatr Þórðarson's "Vikingarvísur" that we may wonder whether the author had anything beside these skaldic sources to build on. A short transition passage on the situation in Norway, Jarl Eiríkr Hákonarson's relationship to Erlingr Skjálgsson, and his departure for England and subsequent death, draws on two stanzas by Sigvatr and two others by Þórðr Kolbeinsson, but here the author seems less exclusively dependent on the stanzas; he knows about Erlingr's personal qualities, his family, his resources, and even his slaves. An even shorter passage on Knútr inn ríki's conquest of England and expulsion of King Ethelred's sons draws on a half stanza by Sigvatr, but here too the author seems to have additional sources about Óláfr's alliance with Ethelred's sons and his progress in Northumbria. His return to Norway with two ships and his capture of Hákon jarl Eiríksson in Sauðungssund (pp. 35–39) are underpinned by four stanzas, three by Óttarr and one by Sigvatr. At this point, however, the stanzas are temporarily suspended to allow for a detailed narrative on how Óláfr was received at home and in eastern Norway (pp. 39–54).

The pages in question are rich in particulars and include long speeches by Óláfr, his stepfather Sigurðr sýr, and the petty kings Hrærekr and Hringr. How would the author have known about these matters, and on what basis would he have devised the speeches? There are no indications of oral sources or any other access to this moment in Óláfr's life. Are we to believe that the author imagined a likely course of events and surmised that the occasion would have called for extended speeches? Can we go further and suppose that the long speeches, which are a special feature of *Óláfs saga helga*, are an earmark of invented narrative? Or should we rather suppose that some account of these events was passed down over time and became the basis of the author's written version? The question is not easily answered. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (ÍF 27:XXV) was inclined to believe that the sequence was invented on the basis of what the author knew or could extrapolate about the persons involved.

We must begin by distinguishing between two sections of the narrative, one section on Óláfr's return home and his reception by his mother and stepfather (ÍF 27:39–46) and a second section on his progress to Upplönd and as far north as Skaun in Þrándheimr (ÍF 27:46–54). In the course of this march Óláfr is able to gain the submission of the central provinces. Most fully described is his meeting with the petty kings of Upplönd. It is Óláfr's stepfather Sigurðr who opens the meeting and to whom the chieftains respond. Hrærekr is reluctant to accept Óláfr as king of Norway and advocates continued adherence to the Danish king, but his brother Hringr prefers a native Norwegian to a foreign king, and that view prevails. If we ask how the details of this meeting may have come down to the author of *Óláfs saga helga*, we should remind ourselves that Hrærekr was ultimately exiled by Óláfr and ended his days in Iceland, where he would have had ample opportunity to tell an Icelandic audience his life's story. That could have nurtured an oral transmission maintained and elaborated until it was recorded in writing two hundred years later. We will see that Hrærekr's story is preserved in even greater detail in later sections of *Óláfs saga helga*.

Such an oral source for Hrærekr's story does not necessarily account for the vivid domestic scenes in which Óláfr is welcomed home by his mother and stepfather. Hrærekr was not present during this sequence and would not have had first-hand information about what transpired. It should be pointed out, however, that the domestic scenes and the meeting of the petty kings are cast in the same style to the extent that both are characterized by long speeches delivered by Óláfr and Sigurðr in the first sequence and by Sigurðr, Hrærekr, and Hringr in the second sequence. The narrative is therefore all of a piece stylistically and is uniformly well told. This narrative style could of course be entirely of the author's making, but it could also be inherited from an oral transmission originating with Hrærekr. During the meeting of the petty kings, and perhaps later, Hrærekr could have learned enough about Óláfr's return home to make it part of his eventual narrative in Iceland, although it seems unlikely that he would have devised the political oratory. The latter is more likely to be the author's work.³

The subsequent section of the narrative is a continuation of what precedes it by virtue of pursuing the story of Óláfr's conquest and unification of Norway, this time in Þrándheimr. The account is

studded by no fewer than eighteen full or half stanzas, fourteen by Sigvatr, three from a *flokkr* by Bersi Skáldtorfuson, and a half stanza by Klængr Brúsason. The preponderance of Sigvatr's verse makes it logical that this section begins with his arrival in Þrándheimr and his introduction into Óláfr's court.

What follows pertains to the completion of Óláfr's pacification of Norway, his defeat of Sveinn Hákonarson at Nesjar, and Sveinn's escape and mortal illness in Sweden. Sigvatr is said to have been present in the battle; details of the action could have been extrapolated from his verse or could have been circulated as part of a prose transmission in Iceland. Certain particulars about the movements of Sveinn and his troops presumably did not originate with Sigvatr but could well have been part and parcel of Bersi Skáldtorfuson's *flokkr*, of which only three stanzas are set down, either by inference or in a companion story. Bersi was also present at the battle and would have known about the movements in the enemy camp. In this section it is therefore hard to distinguish between genuine tradition and authorial elaboration. There is information about Erlingr Skjálgsson not touched on in Bersi's extant stanzas, but it could have been included in stanzas no longer preserved. Even without skaldic support there was an abundance of tradition about Erlingr underlying other parts of the saga.

With the pacification of Þrándheimr Óláfr's conquest is complete, and the author turns his attention to the king's Christian mission and his territorial dispute with the Swedish king's kinsman Sveinn Hákonarson. This section is again virtually devoid of skaldic stanzas, but we will see presently that the Icelandic sources are fairly transparent. The themes of Christian mission and territorial dispute are intertwined, suggesting that the chronologically meticulous author felt confronted by two long-term issues that could not be ordered in time. After constructing a large hall in Niðaróss and organizing the court, Óláfr devotes himself to a revision of the laws, but he learns that the maintenance of Christianity leaves much to be desired in Iceland, Orkney, Shetland, and the Faroe Islands. In the meantime the Swedish king Óláfr Eiríksson dispatches emissaries to collect taxes in the disputed provinces. They run afoul of King Óláfr, who has one group hanged while another group makes good its escape back to Sweden.

He then turns to the task of mending Christian observances. To begin with he sends for Hjalti Skeggjason in Iceland. At the same

time he instructs the lawspeaker Skapti Þóroddsson and the other Icelanders responsible for legal questions to remove from the law those elements most contrary to Christianity. In Norway he devotes himself to extending the rule of Christianity from the coastal areas to inner Norway, where paganism remains firmly rooted. In addition he is able to bring a reluctant Erlingr Skjálgsson into line and force terms on him. Subsequently he also succeeds in imposing his rule in eastern Norway, to some extent by force.

At this point the narrative becomes somewhat fragmented. We learn that Óláfr gains the allegiance of a certain Brynjólfur úlfaldi, on whom the king bestows an estate commemorated in a stanza by Brynjólfur. We also learn that Óláfr appoints a man named Þrándr hvíti to collect taxes, but Þrándr is killed by the agents of the Swedish king. With that the narrative reverts to the conversion theme, informing us that eastern Norway was an easier target for Óláfr's mission because people in that region were more familiar with Christianity. Finally, we learn that Óláfr dispatches Eyvindr úrarhorn to kill the Swedish king's district chieftain and tax collector Hrói skjálgi. The Swedes avenge themselves by killing a certain Guðleikr who is charged with a precious cargo for Óláfr from Russia, but Eyvindr úrarhorn promptly retaliates by killing the culpable Swedes. Apart from two lines of a stanza by Brynjólfur úlfaldi, there is no indication of how these disparate events might have been retained in memory, but they are not sufficiently relevant to the saga as a whole to have been invented ad hoc.

More easily explained is the following sequence. The Swedish jarl Rognvaldr is married to the sister of Óláfr Tryggvason, who harbors ill feeling toward the Swedish king because of his role in her brother's death. At her urging Rognvaldr aligns himself with King Óláfr against his Swedish rival. With the enmity of the contending monarchs at fever pitch, the residents of the border regions between Norway and Sweden become increasingly eager for peace and appeal their case to King Óláfr's lieutenant Björn stallari. At the same time Hjalti Skeggjason arrives at Óláfr's court and becomes Björn's close companion. When Björn urges the peace mission, Óláfr somewhat vindictively puts him in command of the initiative, and Hjalti Skeggjason volunteers to accompany him. They begin by spending some time at the residence of Jarl Rognvaldr, where Hjalti gets a particularly warm reception

because his wife is distantly related to Rognvaldr's wife. Hjalti thus becomes a central figure in the subsequent attempts to reconcile the hostile kings. Should we assume that Hjalti is the wellspring of the tradition that grew up about these events in Iceland? We must bear in mind that Hjalti was not the only potential source of information. We are told that Sigvatr also accompanied Björn (p. 92), and five of his "Austrfararvísur" are recorded. In addition, we have also been told (p. 74) that there were other Icelanders at Óláfr's court. Furthermore, there were Icelanders located at the court of the Swedish king (p. 91), Gizurr svarti and Óttarr svarti. Hence there were multiple sources of information about the dealings between Norway and Sweden.

In this and later passages there seems to be almost enough information about Hjalti to justify our imagining a **Hjalta saga Skeggjasonar*, although no trace of such a saga exists. There may nonetheless have been a considerable tradition. The situation may put us in mind of how Haraldr harðráði's lieutenant Halldórr Snorrason returned to Iceland and instructed a young story-telling Icelander on the subject of Haraldr's Mediterranean adventures. Here too there would have been no written account before *Morkinskinna*, but people would have known a good deal about the events. The point is not, however, to focus on Hjalti as the sole source; the mention of other Icelanders both at Óláfr's court and at the court of the Swedish king suggests an extended Icelandic network. Any number of people in this network could have been important conveyors of tradition. Like the story of Haraldr harðráði, Hjalti's story would have required no supporting stanzas, and indeed the next forty pages of the saga (pp. 95–134) record only three stanzas, all by Óttarr svarti.

Friðgerðar saga

The story of how Björn stallari, Hjalti Skeggjason, and Rognvaldr jarl conduct complicated, and for a long time abortive, attempts to make peace and arrange a marriage between King Óláfr and the Swedish princess Ingigerðr has been termed a "Friðgerðar saga." In the critical literature it has acquired a semi-independent status and can be broken down into the following phases:

1. The farmers of Vík long for peace between Sweden and Norway and ask Björn stallari to raise the matter with King Óláfr. Óláfr responds with an ill grace and charges Björn with the dangerous mission to Sweden. Hjalti joins him.
2. During a sojourn with Rognvaldr jarl, Hjalti travels ahead to the Swedish court to test the waters. The Swedish king rejects any talk of peace.
3. Hjalti and Princess Ingigerðr meet with Rognvaldr and discuss the possibility of her marriage to Óláfr. Rognvaldr relays the plan to the Swedish king, who angrily rejects it.
4. The Uppsala lawman Þorgnýr, to whom Rognvaldr has already appealed, now intercedes and undertakes to support peace at the Uppsala assembly. Under pressure from Þorgnýr and public opinion, the Swedish king accedes but fails to carry out his commitment.
5. A cutting remark by his daughter Ingigerðr causes the Swedish king to cancel the marriage plan and marry his daughter instead to King Jarizleifr (Yaroslav) in Russia. The Norwegians decide not to retaliate.
6. Hjalti, having done what he can, returns to Iceland (p. 128). Sigvatr then assumes his role and is sent to Rognvaldr to test the jarl's loyalty. The Swedish king's second, illegitimate daughter Ástríðr visits at the same time, and new marriage plans are forged. With Rognvaldr's collusion she is married to King Óláfr.
7. The West Gautlanders, caught between the Swedish and Norwegian kings, assemble to discuss their plight. They dispatch the wise man Emundr af Skögrum to lay the case before the Swedish king. Emundr tells metaphorical stories, which, after his departure, the king's councilors unravel to the effect that the Swedes are about to rebel and that he should make peace. On the point of losing his throne, the Swedish king acquiesces.

This section of the saga has been a particular focus of research, perhaps because the Swedish scene of much of the action has attracted Swedish as well as Norwegian scholars. The special analysis began in 1916 with Oscar Albert Johnsen and Birger Nerman and may be considered to have culminated in Otto von Friesen's very detailed study in 1942.⁴ Johnsen emphasized the role of Hjalti Skeggjason as the ultimate source for much of the narrative, but he also allowed for

Snorri's having collected Swedish lore during his visit of 1218–1220. “*Friðgerðar saga*” subsequently passed through the wringer of Weibullian criticism with the result that only the skaldic stanzas were credited with a residue of history.⁵ As a consequence, von Friesen began his study in 1942 with a meticulous review of Sigvatr's stanzas, but he also argued that those parts of the narrative not derivative from skaldic authority have some historical basis and should not be considered Snorri's invention, as some previous critics had held. His arguments are compelling.

Von Friesen levels his criticism in particular against those who concluded that the stories of Þorgnýr (1942:252) and Emundr (1942:266) were Snorri's fictions.⁶ They may well have been elaborated and fictionalized in the course of oral transmission, but, he argues, they are nonetheless the residue of historical traditions. Von Friesen leaves latitude for Hjalti Skeggjason's role as a source for what he calls “the first act” of the peace negotiations (1942:244), but Hjalti is no longer as central as he was in Oscar Albert Johnsen's discussion. Indeed, we may observe that Hjalti is a possible source only for parts 1–3 in the synopsis above, not for parts 4–7. We have also seen that there were other Icelanders both in Norway and Sweden; they too could have contributed to the formation of the story.

Sigvatr himself, who seems to have been present at the moment when Ástriðr's marriage to Óláfr was conceived, may have had a more central part in the formulation of the story as a whole than Hjalti. Perhaps we should think of Sigvatr not just as the author of the relevant stanzas but also as a creator of the prose narrative underlying this part of *Óláfs saga helga*.

It is not just the existence of prose narrative that is of interest but the form as well. Both the story of Þorgnýr and the story of Emundr are narrative high points in “*Friðgerðar saga*.” Should we imagine, as Johnsen seems to have done (1916:529, 534–35), that two stray remnants of Swedish lore were converted into particularly brilliant narratives about two wise and authoritative councilors, spokesmen for the people who protected the public weal and saved the king from himself? It seems more likely that they are part of the same narrative concept, twin pillars in one and the same story. If so, “*Friðgerðar saga*” should be considered as a narrative whole, rooted in a rather

extended tradition but of course recast and supplemented, especially with oratory, by the author of *Óláfs saga helga*.

The two stories function in tandem, both celebrating the triumph of diplomacy and negotiation. As we have seen, the background is that the farmers of Vík wish to foster peace and urge Björn stallari to undertake the mission. The Norwegian king is unenthusiastic but agrees to dispatch Björn at his own risk; Hjalti Skeggjason in turn agrees to accompany him. They take up winter residence with the Swedish jarl Rognvaldr, and Hjalti sets out for the Swedish court in advance. Having ingratiated himself with the king, he raises the topic of peace and the marriage of the king's daughter Ingigerðr to Óláfr of Norway. The Swedish king rejects the project out of hand, but Hjalti is able to engage Ingigerðr's interest. After some account of the Norwegian king's pacification of his eastern realm and some general information on the political divisions and institutions of Sweden the story begins in earnest.

Ingigerðr and Hjalti dispatch messengers to Rognvaldr to let him know that prospects for peace are very dim. Rognvaldr arranges to meet with them in a neutral place, and they come to terms on the marriage project. Rognvaldr now visits his wise old foster father, the lawman Þorgnýr, and decries the difficulties involved in dealing with the Swedish king. Þorgnýr lectures him rather patronizingly on free speech for commoners in the presence of the king, but he agrees to lend his assistance at the Uppsala assembly. Here the scene is set, especially with respect to the impressive attendance of the farmers. Björn stallari delivers a proposal for peace, only to be silenced by the outraged Swedish king. Jarl Rognvaldr then tries his luck with the marriage proposal, but is rebuked no less severely than Björn. Now the epic third act is staged, and Þorgnýr rises to say his piece. The scene takes on imposing dimensions as all the farmers stand in unison, creating a great tumult in their eagerness to hear Þorgnýr's words.⁷

When order is restored, Þorgnýr launches into a great address of thirty-three lines, placing the present king in an unfavorable historical light compared to earlier kings and making a clear demand for peace and a marriage alliance. Þorgnýr thus vindicates free speech in the presence of the king in the most uncompromising way. Indeed, he concludes his speech with an outright threat that the farmers will

attack and kill the king rather than suffer hostility and lawlessness. The farmers respond with another enthusiastic outburst, and the king is forced to relent and concede the power of public opinion. He agrees to both peace and marriage, allowing Björn to return to Norway and announce the success of his mission.

This tale is not as adventurous or action-packed as several others, but like all the stories under study here it is artistically and dramatically shaped. It also has in common with the others that it is free-standing and has no support in skaldic verse. In some of these instances there is a fairly prolonged narrative, but Þorgnýr makes only one appearance. There is, however, a certain thematic consistency about the stories; they all dwell on the limits of royal power. Óláfr of Norway must confront unsuspected opposition, while Óláfr of Sweden must acknowledge the power of the people and the power of historical precedent.⁸

The same theme recurs in the second isolable story of "*Friðgerðar saga*." It is occasioned by King Óláfr's refusal to abide by his promise to make peace and his decision to marry his daughter Ingigerðr to King Jarisleifr (Yaroslav) of Russia instead of King Óláfr Haraldsson. Using Sigvatr and a nephew of Sigvatr's as intermediaries, King Óláfr and Rognvaldr then plan to contract a marriage between Óláfr and the Swedish king's second daughter Ástriðr, without her father's consent. The people of West Gautland consequently worry about their imperiled relationship with the Swedish king in Uppsala and resolve to mend fences. They appeal to the lawman Emundr af Skǫrum, who undertakes the mission and presents himself before the king. Asked what news he brings, Emundr launches into two seemingly trivial and irrelevant anecdotes. The first is about a great hunter who goes out into the forest and collects a large number of pelts, but at the last moment he sees one more squirrel darting among the trees. He sets out in pursuit and persists all day long without bringing the squirrel down. When he finally returns to his original location, the sled full of pelts has disappeared and he is left with nothing.

The second story is about a raider who comes upon five Danish merchantmen loaded with rich booty. He captures four of them, but the fifth escapes. Unable to bear the loss, he pursues the elusive vessel without success and ultimately returns only to find that the other four have been recaptured. He too ends up empty-handed. When the king

interrupts Emundr to ask what his business is, he fabricates a legal case in need of resolution. Two men, equal in birth but unequal in wealth and disposition, quarrel over land. The wealthier of the two is found liable, but he pays over a gosling for a goose, a young pig for a mature boar, and, in lieu of a mark of refined gold, only a half mark, the other half being composed of clay and earth. On top of that he utters dire threats. Emundr then asks for the king's judgment, and the king determines that the man who is liable shall make full payment or be subject to outlawry. Emundr thanks him and departs, leaving the court in secret.

The next day the king begins to ponder Emundr's stories with his councilors. He surmises that the two men who quarrel over land are to be understood as the Norwegian and Swedish kings, but he quizzes the councilors on what the forms of payment might mean. They explain that the Norwegian king got the illegitimate princess Ástríðr instead of the legitimate Ingigerðr (a gosling for a goose, etc.) and was nonetheless content with his lot. They go on to explain that the Swedes will rebel if Óláfr does not abide by his agreement to make peace. The king grasps the situation and submits; at a law assembly the gathered delegates work out a compromise according to which Óláfr and his son Jákob (later Qnundr) will rule jointly until Óláfr's death. This opens the way for a final peaceful resolution of the conflict between the Norwegian and Swedish kings.

Like the other stories we will explore, the anecdotes involving Þorgnýr and Emundr are straight prose narratives not underpinned by stanzas. Þorgnýr's role may be traceable to Hjalti Skeggjason, but by the time Emundr comes onto the scene, Hjalti has returned to Iceland. We are told that Sigvatr and his nephew are complicit in the marriage of Ástríðr to Óláfr Haraldsson, and perhaps uncle and nephew were the original mediators of the tradition about the final settlement of the conflict. Or there may have been other Icelanders at the Swedish court who were in a position to transmit the tale. In other words, it is perfectly possible that there is a kernel of tradition in the story of Emundr. On the other hand, the narrative is so intricately political and diplomatic that it may have been concocted by a politically minded writer in retrospect. It is not an action story, like some of the others we will review, but a drama of words and metaphors, more a literary than a narrative exercise. It does, however, have in common with all

the stories surveyed here that it is about the parameters of royal power and the price of autocracy.

The Story of Hrærekr

In general terms, everything in *Óláfs saga helga* is a story, but the tale of Hrærekr, which is inserted between the tales of Þorgnýr and Emundur, is a story in a narrower sense. It is not an essential part of the biography of Saint Óláfr but tangential to it. All the reader really needs to know is that Hrærekr is one of the five kings Óláfr captured in a single morning; that much is integral to the account of how Óláfr subjected Norway to his rule. But the author goes on to tell the whole of Hrærekr's story down to his dying day, a narrative that in its final phases has no relevance to Óláfr. It is a private history, not part of the public record with which a royal biography is normally concerned. Nor is it authenticated by any skaldic stanzas, which are the mark of the public record. It is a sort of king's saga within a king's saga since it recapitulates much of Hrærekr's life.

Stylistically the story has much in common with the Icelandic *þættir*, being of limited scope but rich in deceptively mundane detail with unsuspected implications and resonances.⁹ It also shares with many of the *þættir*, and many of the embedded Icelandic stories in general, the theme of wit triumphant. Hrærekr's case is particularly pointed because the contestants are so unevenly matched. How likely is it that a helpless blind captive will get the better of his captor king? And yet Hrærekr, blinded after his capture and kept under close guard, very nearly does. That is the gist of the plot and the element that binds the episodes together. Hrærekr's ingenuity and his psychological discipline are a match even for Óláfr's redoubtable intelligence. But in good saga style, one antagonist is not exalted at the expense of the other; we may think more of Hrærekr without thinking less of Óláfr.

It is also a concomitant of saga style that the portraits, however brief, are deftly drawn. Óláfr is described elsewhere as being self-contained and not given to overreaction, but nowhere are these qualities so vividly rendered as in this story. The king understands that among the petty kings Hrærekr is the greatest threat and therefore has him cruelly disabled, but once this measure has been taken, Hrærekr is well provided for and is the beneficiary of considerable patience. At

one point Óláfr's retainers urge him to execute his captive, but Óláfr is proud of his bloodless victory over five petty kings and is reluctant to kill a kinsman. The portrait is one of a decisive but, within the bounds of autocracy, a moderate ruler. The king's character is not compromised by Hrærekr's extraordinary cunning.

The story of his cunning is briefly as follows. After his blinding, Óláfr assigns a servant to accompany him wherever he goes, but Hrærekr regularly beats his companion until the man finds it prudent to abandon the task assigned him. The pattern repeats itself with a series of servants, all of whom depart to save themselves. Finally a servant is appointed who is Hrærekr's kinsman and lets himself be persuaded to make an attempt on Óláfr's life. At the last moment, however, the assassin loses his nerve and throws himself at Óláfr's feet with a plea for mercy.

Óláfr now assigns two loyal retainers to take over the guard duty and supervise Hrærekr in a separate residence. Since he has an ample supply of money, he makes it a habit to regale his companions with abundant drink. Among these companions is a long-standing servant named Fiðr (Finnr), with whom Hrærekr holds secret converse. One night Hrærekr lulls everyone to sleep with drink, then calls his guards to accompany him to the latrine. The guards are cut down by men who have been summoned by Fiðr and who now abduct Hrærekr in a boat. Sigvatr becomes aware of the escape and awakens King Óláfr so that he can organize a search party. The searchers are able to recapture Hrærekr, and he is placed under tighter guard than ever. Having failed to enlist successful intermediaries, Hrærekr now takes matters into his own hands. During a church service he sits next to Óláfr and tries to plunge a knife into his back, but Óláfr's cloak deflects the blow.

The final act of the story is connected with an anecdote about the Icelander Þórarinn Nefjólfsón, who is resident with King Óláfr. One morning Óláfr sees Þórarinn's foot protruding from his bedclothes and comments that it must be the ugliest foot in town; in fact he is willing to make a wager that this is so. Þórarinn accepts the wager and uncovers his other foot, which he claims is uglier than the first because it is missing the big toe. Óláfr counters that the first foot is uglier because it has five ugly toes, not just four. Þórarinn accedes and Óláfr wins the bet. That allows him to make a demand, and he duly requests that Þórarinn transport Hrærekr to Greenland. The upshot of

the story is that Hrærekr winds up in Iceland, where he stays first with Þorgils Arason and then with Guðmundr inn ríki Eyjólfsson.

The story is both lively and humorous; we are led to ponder whether and how Hrærekr will outwit Óláfr despite his apparent helplessness. The contrivances emerge gradually, as in the case of the loyal helper Fiðr. The scenes of nocturnal escape and attempted assassination in the church are teased out in vivid detail, and Þórarinn Nefjólfsson has an enduring place in the Icelandic repertory of funny stories. If we ask ourselves how such a tradition originated and was transmitted, three candidates suggest themselves: Hrærekr, Sigvatr (who discovers Hrærekr's escape), and Þórarinn Nefjólfsson. As in the case of Hjalti Skeggjason, we should not necessarily assume that a particular individual was the original teller. There may have been no such thing as an "original teller" but rather an accumulation of anecdotes worked together and evolving over time. It is probably simplistic to assume that only one teller is responsible for the narrative form, and perhaps no less simplistic to assume that all the narrative niceties are the property of the final author. More attractive is the idea that the narrative was forged gradually and came to the author as a full-fledged story.

The theme that runs through all the incidents is Hrærekr's resourcefulness, which develops along the lines of a prison escape drama. Hrærekr is not only impressively patient and persistent but also a master of deception. The nature of his character is to counterfeit character. We may wonder why at some times he cultivates a harsh manner while at other times he turns cheerful and extroverted. There appears to be no specific reason other than to mask his true designs under assumed moods. Hrærekr makes a point of never being his true self and is therefore always inaccessible to the observer. His character is to have no ascertainable character, so that he is enabled to operate in complete secrecy. Even the minor players on this stage have character. Sigvatr, as in the well-known scene in which he confers the name Magnús on the king's son, circumvents Óláfr's dislike of being awakened by having the church bells rung prematurely. He too is a man of many remedies. Hrærekr's kinsman Sveinn is willing enough to help in the mission of vengeance, but unlike the other characters in the story he does not have the requisite discipline, and his character collapses at the sight of Óláfr's penetrating eyes. He is impressionable and succumbs easily to Hrærekr's flattering recruitment, reinforced

by the transparent promise of a jarldom, but he is deluded when he believes that he can execute the plan. He is in fact a foil to Hrærekr's other helper Fiðr, who is as swift of wit as he is afoot. We learn nothing about him because he operates completely behind the scenes, but that is his strength and the secret of his success.

The personal style of these characters matches the narrative style of the story as a whole. It is one of the characteristics of the sagas that the meaning of the action is not always transparent, or is not revealed until a later point in the story. We do not know at the outset what Hrærekr is planning, and we cannot readily interpret his actions. This is the narrative strategy that Hallvard Lie labelled "diskresjon" in his elegant book on the style of *Heimskringla*.¹⁰ "Diskresjon" might be rendered freely by "contrived reticence" in English; as in the modern mystery story, the writer does not tell the readers what they really need to know. Thus we are not told why Hrærekr takes the companions provided by the king off to deserted places to beat them; he could presumably beat them closer to home. The reason seems to be that he is already planning to have in the long run a more collaborative companion. If people are accustomed to his wandering off to a distance, he will then be enabled to communicate in secret with this eventual companion. Similarly veiled is Hrærekr's second attempt on Óláfr's life. He sits next to the king in church and feels the back of his cloak. He accounts for this gesture by admiring the fine silken material, but by now we know that if Hrærekr alleges an explanation, it is probably not the true one. The real explanation does not in fact emerge until the end of the story, when the writer reveals that Hrærekr felt the cloak in order to ascertain whether Óláfr was wearing a byrnie. A feature that elaborates the cloak metaphorically and ironically is the hood. Óláfr is the actor with the unobscured countenance, whereas Hrærekr is doubly hooded by virtue of being both blind and deceitful. As he stabs Óláfr, the hood falls back, giving the king an extra layer of protection; thus the open countenance survives and the truly hooded antagonist is discountenanced. Hooding and unhooding sum up the story.

The composition of the tale is no less finely wrought than characterization and style. Almost mannered is the threefold repetition of Hrærekr's machinations, two attempts on Óláfr's life and a foiled escape. The action is insistently retarded by Hrærekr's repeated mistreatment of his companions and Fiðr's mysterious dodging in

and out of the action, only to disappear once and for all at the end of the failed escape. The dialogue is not honed to the point of repartee and is usually limited to a single exchange between two speakers, but the phrasing is crisply formulated. For example, when Sigvatr returns from the latrine with blood on his clothing, there is the following exchange with his attendant: “‘Have you hurt yourself, or why are you covered with blood?’ He answered: ‘I am not hurt, but I think this signals big news.’” It is the big news that stands to be revealed.

At one point the retardative telling transitions into a commonplace pattern that is both opaque and transparent. In one of his expansive moods Hrærekr provides a great abundance of drink so that his companions fall into a sodden sleep. On the one hand we do not, strictly speaking, know what this drinking portends, but on the other hand we are sufficiently familiar with the intoxication of jailers in Norse literature to suspect immediately that an escape is in the offing. Thus the episode both leaves the reader wondering what will happen next and at the same time clearly suggests a sequel and propels the story forward. For the moment we may simply note that this tale is particularly well told, but we must return to the problem of how it originated and how it was passed down to the thirteenth century in our conclusions.

The Story of Ásbjörn Sigurðarson

The patchwork nature of *Óláfs saga helga* emerges with particular clarity in the transition from the dramatic stories of Þorgnýr, Emundr, and Hrærekr to the somewhat tangled chronicle style of King Óláfr’s first dealings with Orkney. The author begins with a brief historical preface on Orkney and then focuses on the contentions among the brothers Einarr, Brúsi, and Þorfinnr Sigurðarsynir over the domination of the islands. The contentiousness is such that first Brúsi and then Þorfinnr appeals to King Óláfr; these appeals allow the king to drive a wedge between the contenders and claim the islands for himself, with the jarls now subordinate to him. The source for this little chronicle is a version of *Orkneyinga saga*, although it is difficult to know exactly what this version contained and what the author of *Óláfs saga helga* adjusted.¹¹ The style is, however, clearly determined by the written source, not by the sort of oral story that underlies the preceding narra-

tive. The contrast between chronicle style, of which *Orkneyinga saga* is an almost notorious example, and story style is well illustrated by these passages.

The following narrative shows a similar division of labor between chronicle and story style. It gives an account of how Óláfr extended his authority into northern Norway, a region no less remote than the Orkney Islands. Like the previous section, this one begins with a capsule history, this time of Hálogaland, and how Hárekr, the son of Eyvindr skáldaspillir, establishes himself in Þjótta as the most powerful chieftain in the region. Óláfr is in turn concerned with the quality of Christianity in the north and imposes his religion all along the coast to Hálogaland. He also begins to form personal connections, gaining the service of Hárekr, Grankell and his son Ásmundr, and Þórir hundr on Bjarkey.

Having completed his mission in the north, Óláfr turns his attention to rumors of heathen practices in inner Þrándheimr. When verbal admonitions fail, he mounts a punitive expedition to enforce Christianity. At the same time he continues to build his personal network and makes a fast friendship with two sons of Árne Armóðsson, Kálfr and Finn. He then prosecutes the Christian mission in Upplönd, Guðbrandsdalir, Heiðmörk, Haðaland, Hringaríki, and Raumaríki. Most of this narrative remains at the informational level, but the story of the conversion of Dala-Guðbrandr is detailed and finely crafted. It is also a self-contained narrative and is found in the *Legendary Saga* in almost identical form. The common assumption is that it was composed as a separate entity and was interpolated into both the *Legendary Saga* and *Óláfs saga helga*. There is no indication of what the ultimate source of the story might be, and there is disagreement about whether it was composed in Iceland or Norway. Since there are no signs of an oral source, and since the story is constructed on the literary model of the so-called thaumaturgic duel, it seems quite likely to be an authorial invention, but it also appears to predate the author of *Óláfs saga helga*.¹²

The point of departure for our next semi-independent story is a famine in northern Norway. Óláfr seeks to protect the south by forbidding the export of grain from Agðir, Rogaland, and Hǫrðaland. The political situation in southwestern Norway is that Erlingr Skjálǫgsson

controls a very large territory, but his domination is threatened when Óláfr installs a certain Áslákr fitjaskalli (second cousin to Erlingr) in this territory and therefore gives rise to frictions in the contested area. Áslákr appeals to Óláfr, who calls Erlingr to account, but mutual friends are able to smooth matters over and leave Erlingr with his authority undiminished.

This is the background for what is perhaps the most polished, as well as the most politically loaded, story in *Óláfs saga helga*, the story of Ásbjörn Sigurðarson. He is resident in Hálogaland on the Lofoten Islands and is at the very center of the later tensions between King Óláfr and the great western chieftains of Norway. On his father's side he is the nephew of Þórir hundr, who is destined to desert to King Knútr and oppose Óláfr at Stiklarstaðir; on his mother's side he is the nephew of Erlingr Skjálgsson, whose death in a naval encounter will signal the king's downfall. Ásbjörn's story is therefore in some sense the preface to Óláfr's demise at the hands of his chief antagonists.¹³

Ásbjörn falls heir to his father's high status on the island of Qmð and is eager to maintain his father's level of feasting and hospitality, but Hálogaland is afflicted by harvest failures and a shortage of grain. Ásbjörn therefore travels south to purchase the needed supplies and stops at Qgvaldsnes on Kqrmt, a residence in the hands of Óláfr's steward Sel-Þórir. Þórir informs him that the king has forbidden the export of grain to the north and therefore declines to put up any of his own supplies for sale. Ásbjörn continues his journey to the residence of his uncle Erlingr Skjálgsson at Sóli. Erlingr evades the king's prohibition by allowing Ásbjörn to purchase grain from slaves who stand outside the king's law. On his return north Ásbjörn again visits Sel-Þórir, and when Þórir learns of the subterfuge, he enforces the king's prohibition not only by confiscating the cargo of grain but also by seizing Ásbjörn's fine sail in addition, substituting a badly worn one in its place. As a consequence Ásbjörn must return home empty-handed and disgraced. Once at home he must also suffer the barbs of his uncle Þórir.

Stung by this reception, Ásbjörn undertakes a second voyage and lands secretly on the uninhabited outer edge of Kqrmt. From here he proceeds in disguise to Qgvaldsnes, where there is a large gathering in honor of a visit by King Óláfr. In an outer chamber he overhears Sel-Þórir in the main hall recounting the story of his disgrace. Undeterred

by the formal occasion, he rushes into the hall and lops off Þórir's head so that it falls at the very feet of the king. Óláfr orders that he be seized and executed, but the son of Erlingr Skjálgsson, Skjálgr, intercedes and pleads for mercy. The king is too furious to be placated, leaving Skjálgr to set out to appeal to his father. In the meantime, Skjálgr leaves word with Þórarinn Nefjólfsson to delay the execution until the following Sunday.

Þórarinn devises three successive ruses (reminiscent of the epic triads in the stories of Hrærekr and Emundr af Skǫrum) to prolong Ásbjörn's life. On Sunday Erlingr Skjálgsson appears in due course with a force of nearly 1500 (1800) men to confront the king. The bishop is able to defuse the situation and salvage a compromise, with the stipulation that Ásbjörn is to assume Sel-Þórir's position as the king's steward at Qgvaldsnes. When Ásbjörn returns home to settle his affairs, however, Þórir hundr convinces him not to become the king's "slave" and he remains on his estate on Qmð.

This story once again shares features we observed in the earlier ones. It is told as an independent narrative without recourse to skaldic authority. It is laced with wit and high drama, and there is a clear indication of how it found its way into Icelandic tradition, that is, through the central role in Ásbjörn's survival allotted to the same Þórarinn Nefjólfsson who must have contributed to the story of Hrærekr. Finally, it fixes the limits of royal authority. In this case it illustrates the discountenancing of a king by the hereditary aristocracy.

Other Semi-Independent Stories

The first of the remaining three stories attaches to the same theme. It is organized around a certain Karli í Langey (another island in the Lofoten chain) and his brother Gunnsteinn, who take service with King Óláfr. The king undertakes a commercial venture with them, in which they will be equal partners, although the actual voyage will fall to the lot of Karli and his brother. The destination is Bjarmaland (Permia), but on the way Þórir hundr offers himself as an additional partner. The arrangement is that both Karli and Þórir will rendez-vous with twenty-five men apiece, but Þórir appears at the meeting place with a very large ship and a crew of eighty men. Karli and Gunnsteinn are apprehensive about his intentions, but they are unwilling to turn

back and therefore proceed to Bjarmaland substantially outnumbered. At first they engage in profitable trade with the natives, but at the conclusion of these dealings they decide to try their luck with a raid on the sacred precinct of the god Jómali. Þórir stipulates that the idol of the god not be plundered, but he breaks the prohibition himself and seizes a bowl of silver coins from the very lap of the god. Karli then follows suit and cuts a gold torque from the god's neck. In the meantime the natives raise the alarm, and the Norsemen narrowly escape their pursuit as they retreat to their ships.

When the raiders are once more able to assemble, Þórir demands the torque carried off by Karli and insists that the booty be shared out on the spot. Karli replies that half the booty belongs to Óláfr and that Þórir must negotiate the division with him. Þórir turns away to leave, but then calls Karli back and runs a spear through his chest. Gunnsteinn recovers the body and escapes, but Þórir eventually catches up with him, seizes all the booty, and sinks his ship. Gunnsteinn must make his way back to Óláfr's court as best he can.

The story of Karli and Gunnsteinn is now suspended for some fifteen pages while the author turns to other matters: Óláfr's alliance with King Qnundr of Sweden, his dealings with the Faroe Islands, his detention of several high-profile Icelanders at his court, his claims on Helsingjaland and Jämtaland, and the escape of one of the Icelandic detainees. At this point the author reverts, without warning, to the story of Karli and Gunnsteinn. The sequel is not only unexpected but managed in an interestingly opaque way. Óláfr summons Finnir Árnason and reveals a plan to raise troops throughout Norway for a campaign against King Knútr. We will come to realize that this is only a pretext and that the real plan is to avenge the slaying of Karli, but that aim is nowhere stated; we can only extrapolate it from the action.

In the meantime Finnir sets out to recruit forces in Hálogaland. When they have all assembled and been inspected, Finnir rises and confronts Þórir hundr with his slaying of Karli and seizure of King Óláfr's booty from Bjarmaland. Þórir finds himself surrounded by overwhelming odds and must yield to Finnir's demand that he pay over thirty gold marks in compensation immediately. Þórir asks for time to borrow the money from his followers, then pays it out in ever decreasing amounts, procrastinating more and more as the day

wears on and the assembled forces begin to disperse. Having paid only a fraction of what is owed, he promises the balance at a later date, but as soon as the coast is clear, he sails off to England with his ill-gotten gains largely intact in order to join King Knútr. Finnur returns to Óláfr's court and voices the opinion that Þórir has evaded them and is destined to be a bitter enemy, as indeed the saga will bear out.

This story, like the others, includes no skaldic stanzas and must have survived the generations in prose. There are no identified Icelandic witnesses to transmit the lively scenes in Bjarmaland and Hálogaland, but we should bear in mind that in the intermission between the two parts of the story King Óláfr detained notable Icelanders who would have been on hand to hear the reports brought to court by Gunnsteinn and Finnur Árnason. They were therefore in a position to provide the original formulation of the events. The story as it eventually emerged is also analogous to the others reviewed above in the sense that it illustrates the fragility of royal power. King Óláfr is plundered by Þórir hundr and has his retainer Karli killed with impunity, with no recourse but to accept his defeat. There is indeed a considerable irony in his dispatching of Finnur Árnason to raise troops for an alleged campaign against King Knútr, only to have Þórir hundr desert to Knútr's cause with a substantial share of Óláfr's money.

Even before this story is completed, a new one is broached, the evasion of Steinn Skaptason from Óláfr's court. Steinn is one of the king's Icelandic detainees and, along with his countryman Þóroddr Snorrason, he is very discontent with his lot in captivity. He is not guarded in his pronouncements about the king, and the two of them have a less than friendly exchange. One night Steinn departs without leave for Gaulárdalr, where he takes lodging with Óláfr's steward Þorgeirr. Þorgeirr becomes suspicious about his license to be absent from court, and their confrontation ends in Þorgeirr's death. Steinn then goes on to Gizki in Súrnadalr, the residence of Þorbergr Árnason. Þorbergr is away, but his wife Ragnhildr, who is the daughter of Erlingr Skjálgsson, welcomes him as an old acquaintance with open arms. He had once visited her when she was about to give birth and found herself without a priest to perform the baptism. Steinn had procured an Icelandic priest named Bárðr or Brandr, and there is an interestingly detailed account of the baptism. Steinn becomes the godfather and earns Ragnhildr's fast friendship.

Steinn now calls on her friendship and she commits her full support. When her husband returns home, she appeals for his help, but he knows that Óláfr is in high dudgeon and has already outlawed Steinn. He is unwilling to risk the king's anger and orders her to send Steinn on his way, but she counters that if Steinn leaves, she too will leave, something of a commonplace in the depiction of strong women in the Icelandic sagas. The upshot is that Steinn is allowed to stay during the winter.

In the meantime, Óláfr commands Þorbergr to appear before him. Þorbergr appeals to his brothers Finn and Árni for help, but they betoken no sympathy, and the meetings end with hard words. Þorbergr next sends for his brother Kálfr, while Ragnhildr sends for help from her father. Finn and Árni use the time to reconsider their positions and, together with two of Ragnhildr's brothers dispatched by Erlingr, they man large ships. Kálfr and Ragnhildr's brothers are prepared to attack and let fortune take its course, but Þorbergr prefers to give conciliation a chance. A tense negotiation with the king ends with the swearing of loyalty oaths by Árni, Finn, and Þorbergr, while Kálfr refuses and maintains his full independence. Þorbergr also asks for reconciliation on Steinn's behalf, and the king allows him to go in peace with the stipulation that he not return to his court. Steinn then makes his way to England to join King Knútr, like Þórir hundr before him.

This story is curiously bifocal. On the one hand it is the story of Steinn's escape from his unwelcome captivity, and that tale would surely have lived on among Steinn's descendants. On the other hand, it is also a peculiarly Norwegian story of how tensions arose between King Óláfr and the Árnasynir. There is no particular reason for that story to have been transmitted in Iceland, and we may suspect that the author is making adroit use of an isolated Icelandic tradition to construct a version of the disaffection that led to Óláfr's downfall. He knew that Steinn had a special relationship with Þorbergr Árnason's wife (and Erlingr Skjálgsson's daughter) and deduced from that tale a personal friction between King Óláfr and the Árnasynir. The other possibility is that the dissension between the Árnasynir and the king could have been maintained in Icelandic tradition just as the personal dealings of Óláfr and Hrærekr were maintained even though they had no immediate relevance to Iceland and no skaldic warrant.

Whichever option we choose, we may observe the same political thrust as in the previous stories. Steinn escapes Óláfr's clutches despite

his killing of the king's steward, and Þorbergr, by dint of having a forceful wife and powerful in-laws, escapes the king's authority even though he has harbored the king's outlaw. The thrust is therefore quite in line with the message we find in many *þættir*, in which the commoner emerges as the moral victor while the king must be satisfied to be a little wiser.

The last of the interlarded stories we will look at is the story of Arnljótr gellini, a bandit with a heart of gold who later returns to the narrative to join the service of King Óláfr at the Battle of Stiklarstaðir. It is the most literary of the tales included in the saga to the extent that it is a variant of the Grendel story.¹⁴ The focus of the narrative is the departure of the second of the malcontents among Óláfr's Icelandic hostages, Þóroddr Snorrason, and the author reminds us, in words similar to the ones used in the case of Steinn, that Þóroddr chafes in his captivity. He therefore volunteers for a dangerous mission in Jamtaland for no other reason than to be at liberty. Once in Jamtaland, he consults with a lawman named Þórrarr, who in turn convenes a general assembly. Here it is decided not to become subservient to King Óláfr and to hold his messenger in captivity awaiting the judgment of the Swedish king. Þóroddr thus exchanges one captivity for another.

One evening, when men have drunk deeply, one of the Jamtar lets slip the supposition that the Swedish king will have the Norwegian messengers executed. Þóroddr takes the hint and makes good his escape, but he is recaptured and held under still tighter guard. An excess of drink once more puts the captors off their guard and allows Þóroddr and his companions to escape a second time. They take refuge with a man named Þórir and his wife in a small cottage. During the night a huge man in elegant clothes arrives; this is Arnljótr gellini, with whose name Þóroddr is familiar. He proposes to lead the escapees to safety, but they cannot keep pace and are invited to stand on his extra-long skis while he covers the ground at a great rate of speed. In due course they come to an inn and prepare to sleep in the loft. At the same time twelve traders arrive and, after some revelry, lie down to sleep below. At this moment a great troll woman arrives, makes short work of the traders, and puts them on the fire to roast.

Arnljótr now intervenes and is able to run his great spear through the troll's back; she runs out the door, with the spear projecting, at the

same time leaving considerable wreckage behind her. Þóroddr and his companions now part with Arnljótr, who sends his greetings to King Óláfr and goes in search of his spear. Þóroddr finds his way back to King Óláfr and delivers the greetings, which the king receives with a good grace, regretting only that he has not made the acquaintance of such an outstanding man. After spending the winter with Óláfr, Þóroddr gets permission to return to Iceland.

This story exceeds the others in improbability but shares with them the lack of skaldic documentation. Whether it was Þóroddr who had the effrontery to splice his adventure with a folktale or whether subsequent tradition elaborated the tale in this way, we cannot know, but the narrative as we have it represents the furthest stretch of imagination in the saga.¹⁵ It is perhaps the clearest example of a story that can be lifted out of the surrounding narrative without leaving a noticeable gap. The author seems to have indulged himself just this once in story for the sake of story.

But what is the point of the story? Like Steinn Skaptason, Þóroddr feels trapped at the king's court, but unlike Steinn, he emerges from his captivity on good terms with Óláfr. The story does not so much pit Icелander against king as it focuses the individual Icелander's craving for freedom. This is no isolated theme. It is most explicitly embodied in the Icелanders' resistance to King Óláfr's attempted expropriation of Grímsey, but in some way it colors all the stories reviewed here. The stories of Þorgnýr and Emundr argue the independence of the Swedish people from royal tyranny in a highly partisan way. In the story of Hrærekr the author may seem to favor the dispossessed local king against the dominant overlord. In the story of Ásbjörn Sigurðarson the local magnates succeed in freeing themselves from royal authority. Ásbjörn does so by refusing to enter the king's service. (According to the *Legendary Saga* [p. 114] he is later killed at the king's orders, but in *Óláfs saga helga* retaliation is only hinted at [ÍF 27:213], never clearly stated.) In the story of Þórir hundr, Þórir evades the king's monetary fine and escapes his orbit altogether by going over to King Knútr. Steinn Skaptason is able to raise a whole clan against Óláfr, and he follows Þórir's example by deserting to Knútr. In all these stories the question is how to maintain independence from royal authority.

Conclusions

In 1914 Sigurður Nordal was able to publish an authoritative book on *Óláfs saga helga* without mentioning oral sources until the last five pages, and then only in passing.¹⁶ This was understandable because it was his mission to work out the filiation of the written versions. Nor does it mean that he was doubtful about the existence of oral stories; his phrasing (p. 199) makes it clear that he believes that much of the narrative derives in the first instance from oral sources. It is this original oral layer that I have focused on.

The argument for the existence of oral stories is not based solely on the observation that lively stories are likely to be oral stories. The six stories studied here can be assumed to have oral roots because the same narrative matter is touched on in other textually unrelated versions, notably the fragments of the *Oldest Saga of Saint Olaf* and the *Legendary Saga of Saint Olaf*. Thus the prior existence of “*Friðgerðar saga*” is shown by a similar but unconnected account in the *Legendary Saga*. The latter does not include the stories of Þorgnýr and Emundr af Skörung, but it seems to be generally true that *Óláfs saga helga* expands the narrative material previously recorded. This author is the first to tell the full story of Hrærekr, but the *Legendary Saga* suggests that some narrative was in circulation when it states (p. 72): “It is told that he [Óláfr] had the one [of the petty kings] named Hrærekr blinded and sent him out to Iceland to Guðmundr ríki, and that is where he died.”

The story of Ásbjörn is told in some detail in the *Legendary Saga* (pp. 108–14) and figures at the end of the first fragment of the *Oldest Saga* (pp. 405–7). The killing of Karli is at least mentioned in the *Legendary Saga* (p. 108). Steinn Skaptason is mentioned briefly in the third fragment of the *Oldest Saga*, in words that suggest that there was more to tell (p. 413): “Steinn stayed there [at court] for a short time after that and departed, and it is not told here what he experienced afterwards.” Finally, Þóroddr Snorrason’s story is alluded to in the *Legendary Saga* (p. 184) when Arnljótr gellini volunteers for service with King Óláfr: “‘Lord,’ he said, ‘I sent you a silver plate with Þóroddr Snorrason as a sign that I wanted to join you and fight for you.’” Here too there would have been more to tell, but the narratives in question did not surface more fully until the composition of *Óláfs saga helga*.

These stories are clearly set apart from the written sources and informational passages by their lively dialogue and dramatic qualities. Most notable among the stories are “*Friðgerðar saga*” (particularly the episodes involving Þorgnýr and Emundr), the story of King Hrærekr, the story of Ásbjörn Sigurðarson, Karli’s expedition to Bjarmaland, and Þóroddr Snorrason’s adventure with Arnljótr gellini. There is always a close correlation between these stories and identifiable Icelanders who could have put them into circulation. The transmissions seem therefore to be strictly Icelandic, not Norwegian or Swedish, as critics have sometimes thought. Prominent among the informants are Hrærekr (temporarily resident in Iceland), Hjalti Skeggjason, Sigvatr Þórðarson, Þórarinn Nefjólfsen, Steinn Skaptason, and Þóroddr Snorrason. To the extent that these men were primary sources (rather than other unnamed Icelanders), it should be observed that they are men of some distinction, with the exception of Þórarinn Nefjólfsen. The very fact that Þórarinn is said specifically not to have had a special lineage (ÍF 27:125) may mean that there was an expectation that such traditions were attached to great men. That may mean in turn that the cultivation of these traditions was part and parcel of aristocratic self-promotion.

On the whole, the stories appear to be quite independent of skaldic stanzas, suggesting that such narratives were not necessarily tied to poetic transmissions. Although the author(s) of the prologues to *Heimskringla* and the *Separate Saga* insist particularly on skaldic authority, that may be a moment of historical purism not shared by the body of the saga. *Heimskringla* also has latitude for a man-eating troll, a number of miracles, and stories showcasing wit and ingenuity rather than ascertainable fact. That skaldic verse was not a prerequisite suggests that oral transmission, regardless of content, had a certain authority as well. The author of the prologue to the *Separate Saga* says that the poems are “most noteworthy for truthfulness,” but he does not belittle narrative transmissions. Indeed, he states: “News passed between these countries [Norway and Iceland] every summer and it was then committed to memory and passed along in the form of stories.” A review of the narrative passages in *Óláfs saga helga* would seem to bear out this assertion.

The evidence of transmitted stories tends to cluster where information about Icelandic informants is particularly palpable. Where we can

infer storytellers, there are stories. This is unlikely to be coincidental. Rather, it suggests strongly that the narratives are traditional, not the invention of the writer. If allowance is made for the use of oral stories in *Óláfs saga helga*, it thus appears that everything in the saga has an ascertainable source, whether it be oral tradition, skaldic verse, incidental information, deduction, or miracle tales. It is difficult to see where the latitude for authorial invention might be, apart from the set speeches. Furthermore, if everything in this the fullest of the early sagas is anchored in some form of tradition, the implication may be that there is relatively little authorial invention in any of the early thirteenth-century sagas.

To what extent did the Icelandic traditions color or even determine the political drift of the saga as a whole? We may grant that Óláfr was viewed as a saint and was accordingly honored, but, read against the grain, the saga is also a summary of how his dealings with the magnates of Norway and high-status Icelanders led to their defection and his own downfall. This strand is particularly evident in the narratives that seem to have come down in Icelandic tradition. Hrærekr's fate follows directly from Óláfr's suppression of the district kings, and his story may be viewed as a determined resistance to tyranny, no less than Egill Skallagrímsson's self-assertion against the Norwegian monarchy. Hrærekr's stay in Iceland would certainly not have promoted a positive view of Óláfr's political mission, especially when seen in the context of his designs on Iceland. On the contrary, the exiled king would have had an excellent opportunity in Iceland to cultivate the self-image of a forceful and resourceful resistance fighter.

Nor would the inordinate role played by Sigvatr and Hjalti Skeggjason in "*Friðgerðar saga*" have redounded much to Óláfr's credit. Despite the brilliant diplomacy provided by Icelanders, he would have emerged as the lesser king who got the lesser, and illegitimate, Swedish princess. The greater heroes of the story are the local chieftains and wise men Þorgnýr and Emundr, who vigorously defend the rights of the people against autocratic rule.

When the author turns to the story of Óláfr's domestic relations in Norway, the record is also mixed. Most conspicuous is the tale of Ásbjörn Sigurðarson, which forms part of the larger story of Óláfr's dealings with Erlingr Skjálgsson. Erlingr is portrayed as a truly great chieftain, with an authority to match the king's. He is in fact able to

face the king down and prevent the execution of his nephew Ásbjörn. When Erlingr is ultimately slain in battle, Óláfr's cause is already lost; Erlingr's fall signals his own fall, as Óláfr explicitly acknowledges. It is not difficult for the reader to consider Erlingr the greater figure and his local struggle as more admirable than Óláfr's national ambition.

The special Icelandic stake in the favoring of decentralization over centralization comes to the fore when King Óláfr casts his eye on Grímsey. The Icelanders respond at first naively, but the deeply perceptive Einarr Eyjólfsson rises to unparalleled oratorical heights when he lays bare the political implications of giving Óláfr a foothold off the coast of Iceland. What reader would fail to draw an analogy between Óláfr's intrusion into Erlingr Skjálgrsson's territory and Einarr Eyjólfsson's stout defence of Iceland's territorial integrity? One way to read the saga as a whole is to conclude that aggression is the main-spring of Óláfr's actions.

The remaining stories are likely to have originated with the Icelandic representatives summoned to Óláfr's court and then held as hostages.¹⁷ A special point is made of their dissatisfaction and eagerness to flee. Two of them, Steinn Skaptason and Þóroddr Snorrason, make good their escape; one of them deserts to King Knútr and the other returns to Iceland. In light of their captivity, it is unlikely that either of them spread positive reports about their detention or about their captor. Either one of them could have circulated the story of Karli's expedition to Bjarmaland, which is politically significant because it is also the story of Þórir hundr's disaffection from Óláfr and defection to Knútr. Steinn Skaptason's escape is also part of the political fabric because it serves to explain in part the alienation of Kálfr Árnason.

The stories brought home to Iceland are therefore not digressions or ornamental additions; they are tightly interwoven with Óláfr's loss of support in Norway and the defection of the magnates to King Knútr. Óláfr's failure to win or retain the loyalty of the Norwegians becomes a major theme in the saga after the feud with the Swedish king is concluded. His shortcomings raise doubts about him, in contrast, for example, to the adulatory tone of Styrmir's *articuli*. Do the relevant stories merely illustrate the crumbling of Óláfr's support, or did their prior circulation in Iceland in fact inspire the author in his formulation of this theme? Are the stories, with their Icelandic bias and underlying anti-monarchism, perhaps the source of the idea that Óláfr's fall was

occasioned by a diplomatic failure to maintain cordial relations with the Norwegian magnates? I am inclined to think that the stories are not just a narrative source but also a source for the political viewpoint, which is subtly favorable to the district magnates and discreetly but perceptibly critical of Saint Óláfr.

We must now turn to the essential question of whether there is an underlying and consistent political viewpoint in *Óláfs saga helga* as a whole. The question surfaced in the well-known exchange of views between Halvdan Koht in 1914 and Fredrik Paasche in 1922.¹⁸ Koht argued for a definite conflict between king and aristocracy based on events in Norwegian history just prior to the composition of *Heimskringla*. Paasche found little in the way of political commitment in the text, beyond an alignment with church and king. More recently Sverre Bagge has allied himself more with Paasche on the ground that a political thesis in these early works is anachronistic.¹⁹

To some extent the discussion is semantic. Paasche entitled his paper “Tendens og syn i kongesagaene,” but what exactly is the force of *tendens* and the force of *syn*? *Tendens* is perhaps more active and implies a built-in point of view intended to convey the author’s understanding of historical events to the reader. *Syn*, on the other hand, may be more passive; it could be translated “perspective” or “viewpoint,” but it does not necessarily imply an effort on the author’s part to impose an interpretive framework. The “perspective” could be calculated, but it could also be involuntary, revealing the author’s bias but not necessarily signalling a desire on the author’s part to make a political argument. The only critic who seems to have conceptualized this problem is Johan Schreiner, who writes as follows:²⁰ “It is probably not correct to talk about tendency [*tendens*] in the kings’ sagas, but in the case of a work like Snorri’s *Óláfs saga helga* it cannot be denied that there is a basic point of view [*grunnopfatning*], a total perspective [*totalsyn*], and with this is connected an evaluation [or better: and this is by nature evaluative].” At the end of his study, Schreiner concludes (p. 126) that Óláfr’s idea of kingship was fundamentally “anti-aristocratic.”

Schreiner tried to read history from the text of *Óláfs saga helga* and therefore concluded with an assessment of the historical Óláfr. If, however, we are content to read the text without reference to the historical Óláfr, we may conclude that the text is more likely to be

anti-royal. One problem in the Norwegian discussion of politics in *Óláfs saga helga* is that it is too Norwegian.²¹ We must ask ourselves what interest the Icelandic authors of the *Oldest Saga*, the *Legendary Saga*, Styrmir's fragments, *Heimskringla*, and very possibly *Fagrskinna* would have had in an internal Norwegian struggle between King Óláfr and the Norwegian magnates, especially in the political aspects of the struggle. Would the Icelanders have had a great enough interest in this purely domestic matter to formulate a historical thesis about it?

And yet the idea that there was such a conflict seems to be specifically Icelandic. There are traces of it in the fragments of the *Oldest Saga* and in Styrmir's *articuli*, and it is fully present in the *Legendary Saga*. But it may be significant that the oldest source, and the only one certain to be Norwegian, Theodoricus, makes no mention of the conflict and explains Óláfr's demise purely in terms of King Knútr's suborning of the chieftains. This version of events is borne out by *Ágrip*, which may also be Norwegian.²²

But most eloquent is the silence of the 178 stanzas in *Óláfs saga*. Not a single one of them seems to allude to political tensions between King Óláfr and the Norwegian magnates. A stanza by Sigvatr in praise of Erlingr Skjálgsson (no. 26, p. 29) is placed by the author in the context of his intimidation of Jarl Eiríkr Hákonarson and is not connected with his later contention with King Óláfr. Stanza 59 (p. 106) by Óttarr alludes generally to King Óláfr's suppression of the "kings" of Hedemark but does not identify them. The following stanza, also by Óttarr, seems to suggest that Óláfr cut out the tongue of one of these "kings" and the prose (p. 105) identifies him as Guðrøðr from Guðdalar, but this is still in the context of Óláfr's conquest.

When it comes to the waning of Óláfr's fortunes, the emphasis is on how King Knútr buys off the chieftains, not on any differences between Óláfr and the chieftains. A series of stanzas (107–8, 110–11), all by Sigvatr, dwell on the theme of treachery, and Hallvarðr Háreksblasi sums up Knútr's triumph in stanza 119. An interesting aspect of these stanzas is how well they accord with what we find in Theodoricus and *Ágrip* and how poorly they match what *Óláfs saga helga* tells us. Only one stanza (no. 120, p. 314) talks about conflict with a chieftain, and that stanza comes from a *flokkr* composed by Sigvatr on the death of Erlingr Skjálgsson. It describes the battle in which Erlingr fell. Stanza 135 (p. 334), by Bjarni Gullbrárskáld, is interpreted as being about

the parting of Óláfr and Kálfr Árnason and Kálfr's seeking out of King Knútr, but that is only one possible reading.

Only in the actual Battle of Stiklarstaðir are Óláfr's most notorious antagonists among the Norwegian chieftains mentioned. In stanza 155 (pp. 383–84) Sigvatr alludes to Þórir's jacket made impenetrable by Lappish magic, and in the following stanza he recounts how Þórir wounded the king. Stanza 157 (p. 385) by Bjarni Gullbrárskáld is interpreted by the prose to be about the presence of Kálfr Árnason in the battle. Finally, stanza 160 (p. 391) by Þormóðr Bersason and 164 (p. 399) from Þórarinn loftunga's "Glælognskviða" are explicit about the fact that the battle is between the Danes and King Óláfr, not between the king and his chieftains. In other words, everything in the stanzas is perfectly reconcilable with Theodoricus's view that King Knútr bribed the Norwegian chieftains, raised troops, and defeated Óláfr at Stiklarstaðir. Nothing in the stanzas requires us to believe that there is a history of deep-seated animosity between Óláfr and the chieftains.

Should that suggest to us that Óláfr's political conflict with the magnates was an Icelandic hypothesis? If so, what inspired it? It may be oversimplified to suggest that Óláfr's acquisitiveness in Iceland and his differences with Hrærekr and his Icelandic hostages spilled over into Icelandic tradition in such a way as to foster surmises about conflicts between Óláfr and his own chieftains, but some such dynamic may have contributed to the elaboration of history in Iceland. If the Icelanders had no great stake in Norwegian internal politics, they had every reason to reflect on the history of their own independence and the threat posed by the Norwegian king. Halvdan Koht thought that the historical conflict between king and magnates in Norway, as it was resurrected in *Óláfs saga helga*, was colored by the political clashes under King Sverrir, and Paasche agreed, but it seems rather more likely that this conflict owes something to the tensions between Iceland and Norway in the period 1215–1220. That these tensions could have literary consequences is amply documented by *Egils saga*, which, no less than *Óláfs saga helga*, tells not only of the conflict between Icelanders and kings but also between the king and such local magnates as Arinbjörn. Icelandic self-assertiveness could clearly work to raise the profile of Norwegian chieftains who also prized

their independence. Whether *Óláfs saga helga* and *Egils saga* were, one or the other or both, written by Snorri Sturluson or not, they are products of Icelandic sensibilities and reveal analogous concerns.

We have still not addressed the question of whether the political thrust of *Óláfs saga helga* is calculated or involuntary. The question is connected with the much more general problem of whether the sagas lend themselves to overall interpretation, that is, an interpretation that isolates a particular argument throughout the text. The extreme difficulty of reaching an interpretive consensus on an obvious “problem text” such as *Hrafnkels saga* may well discourage us from pursuing such an inquiry. And yet the provincial bias and the anti-expansionist outlook in *Óláfs saga helga* seem rather insistent. How often must the author return to the theme of independence in order to convince the reader that he is advancing a general thesis? Here we have reviewed six relevant stories in the text, without even touching on the explicit plea for independence in the speech of the “Icelandic Demosthenes,” Einarr Eyjólfsen.²³ These passages all work together and suggest resistance to the king. Despite this confluence of meaning, we may not be able to decide whether the passages in question add up to a *tendens* or merely a *syn*, but perhaps we can agree that there are definite authorial attitudes in *Óláfs saga helga*. These attitudes were no doubt foreshadowed in the oral sources, but they also went on to color the Icelanders’ view of their own history, as we will see in Chapter 6.

Thus far it seems clear that oral tradition continued to penetrate the written kings’ sagas down to the time of *Óláfs saga helga* in the second and third decades of the thirteenth century. Since that tradition was largely preserved and passed down by Icelanders, it would not be surprising if the narratives also carried with them certain Icelandic viewpoints and inflections, even to the point of suggesting questions about the Norwegian monarchy. The stories transmitted by oral tradition not only offer an account of the past but also color past events with what amounts to an implied commentary. **Hlaðajarla saga* seems to have entertained alternatives to strict monarchical control inside Norway and *Óláfs saga helga*, which was evolving at the same time, seems to have raised similar issues from the point of view of the Icelanders.

